

I, your glass, will modestly discover to yourself

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by [middlemarch](#)

Summary

He understood her as little as a flower, how it was held in his fingers and yet was a fragrance he could not name.

Notes

See the end of the work for [notes](#)

“You are not alone.”

“You are special.”

“You were perfect.”

Aleksander knew Alina thought he was praising her, encouraging her because she had come to the Little Palace so late, perhaps too late, because Botkin narrowed his eyes and shook his head and Baghra cursed and threatened with her open hand, her birch rod, the other Grisha turned up their noses or gossiped about whether the Darkling had finally made a mistake, that she could not control her power and would never be able to, that she had the manners of a peasant and the skin to match, no matter what Genya wrought, but it wasn’t that, though he did not begrudge her any consolation she found in his words or what he let her see in his eyes. He was trying, so very hard, to understand her. Despite his age and experience, she defied, most marvelously, his comprehension.

She reminded him, fleetingly, of Luda whom he had loved, of how she lifted her chin and held his gaze. She reminded him of women before and after, of Kadri from the north and Rusudan who had had something to do with dreams, calling them forth the way Alina called forth the light, from nothingness and everywhere. There had been no guild for her, rejected by the Etherealiki, baffling the Durasts, but dreams summoned are not companions to shadows; when she left, he could not consider her lost as he would Alina. It was not her power that puzzled him. He recognized how it was with her, how it had been once with him, the sense of a still pool and of the tide, of a wave and a boundless world below. He had never been as hesitant as she could be but his Grisha mother had raised him and hers had not. Even so, there was in her a force that spoke to the power, coaxing it when necessary, reveling in its crest and appetite. He Summoned shadow and she light, but they were too similar to trouble him.

It wasn’t that she was fearless, for she wasn’t and it wasn’t that he didn’t grasp what it was she feared but how she managed it, that meadow she kept as a refuge when it had been nothing but grass and sky. It wasn’t that she was lonely or sad, for he’d seen both in any number of people, and in himself, but Alina’s eyes could not become darker than they were and that sweet, pretty mouth of hers was no less sweet, no less pretty for the tears she shed and those she swallowed. It wasn’t her persistence in learning Botkin’s lessons or her wonderful irritation with Baghra or even the way she would be late to dinner because she was reading in the library, fiddling with the end of a braid, brushing it against her lips.

He kept telling her about herself, hoping he was right. He kept listening to the songs she hummed under her breath, her favorite about a girl who wore a falcon on her wrist and sent it off to hunt; she sang low as though she also heard a boy’s heart-breaking tenor. He found her sketchbook, opened to the drawing of the great Morozova stag, but leafed through the rest of the pages and saw Genya as she Tailored and David watching her, Fedyor’s straight back, a half a dozen portraits of the wounded tracker she’d have spent herself saving if she could, and Aleksander’s own face, again and again, in mirrors and against snow, the angle of his jaw and the darkness of his beard against his cheeks, giving way to his throat, a picture of how she’d wished to turn in his arms as they’d ridden at a punishing pace for Os Alta. There were his

hands on her, cutting her to show the light and gesturing towards the royal dais, holding a bouquet of irises, his shoulders squared, his kefta swirling around him. There was a terrible, tender drawing of him sleeping, something she'd imagined or dreamt or somehow seen without him knowing it possible, his lashes long and dark on his cheeks and his mouth soft. He'd heard her describe herself as a mediocre mapmaker and had held his tongue, wanting her to think of herself as Grisha, knowing that she was wrong; he'd never seen such exquisite maps of the soul as Alina's work in pencil and ink and very rarely, some detail picked out in a vivid color, the iris petals, David's eyes, the rare blue sheen on his own black hair. He wanted to keep the book but she'd miss it and ask. Whether or not she was told, she'd figure out that he was the only one who could want the book and keep it from her and that wasn't something he could wrap his mind around. He'd already felt her hands on his back as she'd helped him into the kefta as if she were any wife and he any husband, he felt her touch his arm when he'd spoken of the past, the taste of her lips from that one, brief, tormenting kiss; these were secrets he could keep and still see her moving through the halls, still imagine her within the Fold with all her light to command.

And then she drew him to her in the War Room, her hands on his face, asking him with those smoky dark eyes and then answering him when he gave her leave; her mouth on his, lips parted, taking him as no one ever had, giving him her longing, making him beloved who had only been feared and admired for time past counting. He could not hold her close enough but it wasn't because she wanted coaxing though she trembled in his arms as he kissed her deeply, desperately. He could not understand her but he wanted to understand the Aleksander she loved; when they broke apart, his hand on her thigh, hers at his throat, he looked at her and gave up trying to know any better. She was Alina, milaya, and he was not alone, not because she claimed him or controlled him, but only because what she saw when she looked at him was her heart's dearest desire, a mystery he couldn't solve but only live with.

End Notes

Title is from Shakespeare.

Aleksander has been alive A Very Long Time so I gave him some other Intense Relationships before circling back to his bewilderment and enchantment by Alina.

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